HS/HC 850

Item 20

Xerox copy of the LIFE article. (23 Jul 71, p. 52)

Washington, early in 1953, soon after they had left public office, Harry Truman and Dean Acheson exchanged greetings. Acheson served as Truman's Secretary of State for a full four years, from 1949 to 1953.

Pungent Memories from Mr. Acheson

Kenneth Harris is a British journalist who was stationed in Washington during the early 1950s. He recently interviewed 78-year-old former U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson for BBC television, and the following conversation is drawn from that interview.

Dean Acheson's appointment as Secretary of State was one of the first things Harry Truman did when he was elected President of the United States in 1948. The Korean War began in June 1950. It went badly for General MacArthur, the American commander of the United Nations forces. Later, there was talk of withdrawal and of using the atomic bomb. The British prime minister, Clement Attlee, flew to meet the President in Washington. I asked Mr. Acheson how deep was the distrust which the British government seemed to have of the Americans at this time.

I think it was not distrust on the part of the British: it was alarm. Mr. Attlee did quite right to do this. But the President made a great flub in a press conference. The press led Mr. Truman on. They said: who decides what weapons are to be used in fighting in Korea? And Mr. Truman quite naturally said: why, the commanding general. Was this true of air, ground, navy? Surely—it's true of everything. Would this be true of the atomic bomb? Mr. Truman unhappily said yes. Well, the answer was no. The law said that only the President could authorize the use of this weapon. So after this thing was over, we all rushed around like chickens without heads and we put out a clarification. The clarification said, unhappily the President made a mistake or misunderstood the question, because it isn't up to the general, it's up to *him* to decide it. Before the clarification caught up with the rest of the news conference, there was a hot debate going on in the House of Commons. It was a terrible thing that General MacArthur was going to decide whether the atomic bomb would be used in Korea, and Mr. Attlee said: I will fly to the United States this afternoon and take this up with the President. By that time we'd said this wasn't the case, but Mr. Attlee was up to his ears in flight and he had to come. He arrived here: they were to meet at 10:30 the next morning to discuss this. I was early at the department and Bob Lovett called me from the Pentagon and said: "When I finish talking with you, you cannot reach me again. All incoming calls will be stopped. A national emergency is about to be proclaimed. We are informed that there is flying over Alaska at the present moment a formation of Russian planes headed southeast. The President wishes the British ambassador to be informed of this and be told that he and Mr. Attlee should take whatever measures they think are proper for Mr. Attlee's safety. I've now finished my message and am about to ring off." I said: "Well, wait a minute, Bob. Before you do, do you believe this?" And Bob said: "No, good-bye." And hung up. The radar had reported a formation flight coming over Alaska. It was interpreted to be Russian planes, all our air forces were alerted and were in the air, and continued in the air for some hours. Later it was discovered that these were geese. But they were perfect bombers: they flew in bomber formation and they couldn't have done better. I gave the message to Oliver Franks, who said to me in his very calm way: "Are you going to be at the White House at 10 o'clock?" I said: "Yes, I am." And he said: "We will be there, too." But it gave us an idea of what it felt like at any rate to have bombers headed toward you.

It's often been said that the relationship between you and President Truman is the best relationship between a President and a Secretary of State that has ever been. You and he are two quite different people; you come from different backgrounds. Why did you get on so well?

I think in part for that very reason. I think in part we were able to see one another quite clearly and without any sense of rivalry of any sort at all. The President's qualities seemed to me to be utterly superb. He felt that he could trust me with anything. And he could—this was right. He hadn't been President more than a year, the war being over, when it was decided we should resume the old custom of having a diplomatic dinner. When we came to look at the diplomatic list, it had vastly increased. It was not possible to do what we had done in the past.

CONTINUED

'I get a great deal of pleasure out of Agnew'

Since 1953, Acheson has been a Washington lawyer. A frequent counselor on international affairs, he was recently invited to the White House by President Nixon and spoke out against cutting back American forces with NATO in Europe.

CONTINUED

So our Chief of Protocol had a very happy bright idea: we would have two dinners, we would put all the embassies in alphabetical order in the English language and have one dinner made up of the odd numbers and one made up of the even numbers.

On the afternoon of the dinner, a girl came to my office very much upset and said she'd just had a call and that the Russian ambassador was ill and unable to come to the dinner and that the chargé was ill. And so I went over to the White House and we rearranged all the tables and we had quite a how-do-you-do about all of this. And it was a very nice dinner, it went off very well. The next morning I was summoned to the White House. The President said: "What do you call it when you want to get a man out of the country?" "You mean *persona non grata*?" "That's it," he said. "That Russian, that's what he is to me. Now you get him out of the country right away: he's been rude to Mrs. Truman." And I said: "Well, Mr. President, let's sort of think about this a little bit, because I really don't think it's the Russian's fault at all. I think it was our fault. I've now discovered that probably the reason he didn't come was that we had invited the ambassadors of Estonia and Latvia, which are now parts of Russia so far as the Soviet Union is concerned, to the same dinner, because they turned out to be odd or even or whatever the thing was, and this was stupid of us, and undoubtedly he'd been directed by Moscow not to come." And he said: "Nevertheless, he's been rude to Mrs. Truman, and out he goes." At that point his secretary came in, picked up the house telephone and gave it to him, and he listened for a while and said: "Yes, my dear, I'm talking with him now." And a little more talk, and he said: "This is Mrs. Truman, you talk with her." So I got on the telephone and Mrs. Truman said: "Dean, you mustn't let Harry do this." And I said: "Well, that's all very well for you to say, but how do we stop him?" And she didn't say anything for a moment, and then an idea occurred to me, so I pretended that she had said something to me, and I said: "Oh, Mrs. Truman, I don't know whether I really ought to do that." And I heard her sort of chuckle at the other end. I listened some more. And I said: "Too big for his breeches? Oh no, you mustn't say a thing like that. Surely, people will say it, but *we* mustn't say it. Above himself? Oh no, Mrs. Truman." He said: "Give me that telephone." I handed it back to him and he said: "All right, Bess. You and Dean are both against me. I guess I'm licked and I'll just give in." The unfortunate man we were talking about was named Ambassador Novikov, and as I went out of the room the President said: "Tell old Novacaine we didn't miss him."

I understand that you created problems for the State Department with Congress by being rather arrogant toward them.

The question is: was I? I suppose in a way, yes. But this was usually said by people who were not in Congress. I never heard a congressman say this, or a senator. Congress did everything we asked them to do, every single thing. We got appropriations for foreign aid of $8 billion a year. Nowadays they have a terrible time getting $1 billion or $1.5 billion. We had plenty of rows, but so many people make a mistake in thinking that it's important to be loved. I never really had any great yearning to be loved. I've wanted to be successful in what I was doing, and if I was successful I'd leave the love to somebody else.

You've written that McCarthy was a kind of ghastly flash in the pan, and that that kind of thing could never happen again. But do you think it's possible to draw a parallel between what McCarthy was doing in the '50s and what Vice-President Agnew is doing in his relations with the American press?

McCarthy was a thoroughly bad man. He was a horrid little creature. One just couldn't have any respect for him. He didn't even have courage. There was just nothing about him that was good, and he was underhanded, mean. He was a slimy little rodent of a creature. There's none of that in the Vice-President at all, and there was none of that in the troubles in the last election. It's true that it was bitter. American politics have always been conducted on a very low level. We do not rise to great heights of principle. One only has to recall what happened at the time of the Civil War; the abuse of President Lincoln was just dreadful. The abuse of President Washington was the same. We're a rough, tough people. Furthermore, your own profession, I think, is a very thin-skinned one: they can dish it out, but they can't take it. When people start criticizing the press, the press screams: it's a foul blow, you can't do that to me, I am engaged in a great public service. Therefore, they think Agnew is a dreadful person. I get a great deal of pleasure out of Agnew. I don't agree with him. I know him fairly well, and I've protested to him that he would do better to do less of this, but I don't feel this is McCarthy at all.

What is your assessment of de Gaulle?

I thought highly of de Gaulle as a person. I thought very little of de Gaulle as a statesman. Even the idea that he did a great deal for France seemed to me not to be the case. I thought the same thing could be done for France by someone who didn't do as much harm to Europe as he did. But as a person he was a delight. A great person. He seemed to me to be out of touch with the real world. He seemed even more of a 17th century character than an 18th or 19th century. He was living in a palace of ghosts. People were walking around with wigs, and a century which had been long dead was all around us. But he was a man of great character. When President Kennedy sent me over in 1962 to tell him about the Cuban missile crisis, this came out very fully. I arrived in France totally unknown to everybody—at least my arrival was unknown. I added to the mystery by asking Gen. de Gaulle to send two of the staff cars to bring us over. I didn't want an embassy car, I didn't want any indication at all to the press or the public that anything unusual was happening. So he sent two small French cars, and we drove down into the garage basement of the palace and were led up through the basement past the wine closets. There were all sorts of steel doors with little eyelet holes in them, and people would look through and give a password. I had a very amusing CIA friend along, with the photographs. Halfway through this, he said: "D'Artagnan, is that saber loose in the scabbard?" And I said: "Aye, Porthos." And he said: "Be on the alert. The Cardinal's men may be waiting." Finally, we were brought up into the cabinet room, where an old friend of ours, whose name was Lebel, greeted us. The president met me at the left-hand front corner of his desk, standing there looking the height of dignity but with a slightly bizarre quality about him. He struck me as looking like a pear on top of two toothpicks. He had narrow shoulders, a rather large nose, which was the stem of the pear. Then he went down to a rather round stomach and behind, and then two very long, very thin legs. He stood there and said to me: "Your President has done me great honor in sending so distinguished an emissary." Well, this quite overcame me: there was no answer in the book as to what you said to something like that. So it seemed to me that the thing to do was to say nothing. So I just bowed, deeply, and then he turned around, sat down at his desk, folded his hands and motioned me to a chair.

Lebel was there to interpret, and I thought: well, this is going to be pretty formal, but we'll carry it through. So I sat down, put my hand in my pocket, pulled out a letter from the President to him and said: "A letter from the President of the United States." And handed it to him. Well, this startled him very much: the idea that nuclear weapons were being put by the Russians into Cuba was new to him. I then pulled out another piece of paper and said: "Here is a speech which the President will make in three or four hours from now telling the country what is going on, and what he proposes to do." The general took it, and I said: "Perhaps I can abbreviate this for you. These mis-

CONTINUED

CONTINUED

siles were brought into Cuba during the hurricane season, when our usual flights over Cuba could not see through the clouds, and therefore we knew nothing about this until the second week in October, when the clouds cleared off and we began to be able to photograph these things. To our great surprise, we found several places in Cuba where missiles were being installed, more and more as the days went on. I have the photographs of these, and I should be very glad to have them brought in and show Your Excellency the photographs." I was struck by his answer. He said: "Not at all, not now. This is mere evidence, and a great nation such as yours would not take a serious step if there was any doubt about the evidence at all. Therefore, for our purposes the missiles are there." He then told me that I could say to the President, "France will support him," which I thought was really quite lovely. He didn't say: "I will support him," or "my government will." He said: "France will."

What's your assessment of Kennedy?

He was a most attractive person. He had real charm. He did not seem to me to be in any sense a great man. I did not think he knew a great deal about any of the matters which it's desirable that a chief of state or a President of the United States should know about. He was not decisive.

We thought he was: the Cuban crisis, for instance. There was the legend that he was a very decisive man indeed.

Well, it is a legend: it is not the fact, I think. I came into the crisis about the third day of the week. The President asked me to come and see him and I talked with him for quite a while about this crisis. He seemed to me to be repeating some of his brother's clichés, which I had opposed rather vigorously in council. One of them was that if we bombed these Russian missiles, this would be, as Bob Kennedy put it, "Pearl Harbor in reverse." I said both then and when I talked with the President in private that I thought this was a silly way to analyze a problem. Pearl Harbor came out of an unprovoked sudden attack by the Japanese on our passive fleet that was doing nothing. What we were now faced with was the introduction of nuclear weapons into Cuba and what we were going to do about it. To talk about that as a Pearl Harbor in reverse seemed to me high school thought that was unworthy of people charged with the government of a great country. And I said: "You oughtn't to be saying things like this. It is unworthy of you to talk that way." And I remember the President walking over to the French windows that look out onto the Rose Garden in the White House, and he looked out there for a long time. He turned around to me and said: "I think I'd better earn my salary this week." Well, your heart went out to him—but it didn't seem to me greatness. This is not really what I was looking for in the leadership of my country at this point. On other occasions, I'd had experience with him which led me to this conclusion: that he did not have incisiveness and he was really out of his depth where he was. I hate to say this because I know it's going to be misunderstood, but his reputation is greater because of the tragedy of his death than it would have been if he had lived out two terms.

When you were having that very, very rough time as Secretary of State, your enemies as well as your friends paid tribute to your courage and stamina, and many wondered whether it was some kind of religious faith that kept you going. Was it?

I think probably not. I've never been much attracted by theological ideas. Even ethical ideas have seemed to me sometimes ambiguous. What seemed to be most important was a certain stoical attitude toward the world which I felt that my father had to a very great extent. His view was that what happened to you had to be borne, and how you bore it was more important than what it was. More important than how it came out. ■